

# Effectiveness of Consensus Information in Advertising: The Moderating Roles of Situational Factors and Individual Differences

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## Abstract

**Purpose** This study aims to investigate the influence of both individual consumer differences and the purchase decision context on the effectiveness of consensus information in advertising.

**Design/Methodology/Approach** Three experiments explore the effectiveness of consensus information. In Experiment 1, gender serves as a moderator. Experiment 2 contains an examination of the susceptibility to interpersonal influence (SII) and purchase decision context as two potential moderators. Finally, Experiment 3 instead explores the need for cognitive closure (NFC) but again includes the purchase decision context as the two possible moderators.

**Findings** In Experiment 1, female participants, but not male participants, generate higher purchase intentions for ads with consensus cues as opposed to those without them. With Experiment 2, this study demonstrates that the effectiveness of consensus cues increases for a group (vs. personal) purchase decision, but only for people with high susceptibility to individual influence. In Experiment 3, the effectiveness of consensus cues is relatively greater for a group (vs. personal) purchase decisions, but only for consumers with a high NFC.

**Implications** Understanding what moderates the effectiveness of consensus information in advertising has the potential to help practitioners apply consensus information more effectively to improve their advertising returns.

**Originality/Value** This study provides initial evidence about the impact of consensus information in advertising on purchase intentions, which is contingent on the situational context and individual differences.

**Keywords** Advertising · Consensus · Informational social influence · Need for closure · Susceptibility to interpersonal influence

Advertising frequently incorporates the views of the majority of consumers as a persuasive tactic or as a way to substantiate ad claims (Buchanan and Smithies 1991). Views of the majority, hereafter referred to as “consensus information,” are germane simply because they persuade. Often consumers purposely search for other consumer’s opinions when collecting information about a product. For example, when considering what movies to watch, people often consult movie reviews or the opinions of friends. When browsing a virtual bookstore on the internet, shoppers pay attention to how others have rated the books, movies, or other products in which they are interested. What’s more, it seems that when others’ views are consistent, they become informative. Past research indicates that consensus information influences an individual’s product evaluations in a way that is consistent with the direction of the consensus (Aaker and Maheswaran 1997; Burnkrant and Cousineau 1975; Maheswaran and Chaiken 1991).

Deutsch and Gerard (1955) argued that the views of others can exert either an informational or a normative social influence. In a review, Price and Feick (1984) concluded that most discussions on the influence of others focus on normative social influences. However, they argued that consumers are not simply motivated to conform to social norms. Price and Feick recognized that product

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judgments are sometimes complex and involve a certain degree of uncertainty. The opinions of others can serve an informational utility by reducing the complexity and uncertainty of consumers' decision-making. It is believed that product evaluation is an important setting for exploring how informational social influence operates (Cohen and Golden 1972).

In line with these views, this paper proposes that consensus information serves an important informational utility—namely, providing diagnostic judgment inputs for consumers developing purchase decisions. This paper argues that the diagnostic value of consensus information varies across individuals and situations. Specifically, it predicts that consensus information provides more diagnostic value for females than for males. Females are more responsive than males to information from others because they have an interdependent view of the self, whereas males have a more independent view of the self (Markus and Oyserman 1989). Due to these differences, female consumers' intentions to purchase an advertised product will be affected by the presence of consensus information; however, male consumers' intentions to purchase will not.

This paper explores two other individual characteristics: susceptibility to interpersonal influence and need for cognitive closure (NFC). It postulates that the influence of these individual characteristics is not consistent but varies as a function of purchase context. Even though purchase decisions are usually made by an individual, for him or herself, sometimes a purchase decision is made on behalf of others or for others. A purchase decision made on behalf of others, or for others, may involve higher levels of social risk, such as leading others to think poorly of the purchaser. Under such conditions, consensus information may be of more diagnostic value for individuals who are more susceptible to interpersonal influence or have a greater NFC.

Specifically, this paper proposes that for purchase decisions involving high perceived social risk, the more susceptible an individual is to interpersonal influence, the more likely he or she will rely on the heuristic cue that "consensus indicates correctness" for product judgment. In addition, under such conditions, the consensus information should be more diagnostic for those in greater need of cognitive closure, thus exerting a stronger influence on their purchase decisions.

### The Effects of Consensus Information

Aaker and Maheswaran (1997) defined consensus information "as information involving other's opinions about or evaluations of an attitude object" (p. 317). Mackie (1987) described consensus as the "majority viewpoint." Social psychology literature has demonstrated that majority

viewpoints about an object or issue can generate attitude changes that are privately accepted and sustainable for long periods of time (Areni et al. 2000; Mackie 1987). In a similar vein, consumer literature has shown that individuals adopt majority product evaluations as inputs for making product judgments (Aaker and Maheswaran 1997; Burnkrant and Cousineau 1975; Maheswaran and Chaiken 1991).

The influence of consensus information or majority viewpoint can be categorized generally as social influence. In consumer behavior research, Deutsch and Gerard (1955) distinguished two types of social influence: informational and normative. Informational social influence occurs when individuals believe that viewpoints held by the majority reflect reality. On the other hand, normative social influence occurs when individuals desire to conform to majority viewpoints.

To understand the different processes underlying the two types of social influence in consumer behavior, Burnkrant and Cousineau (1975) turned to Kelman's (1961) discussion regarding internalization, identification, and compliance. Burnkrant and Cousineau proposed that informational social influence operates through the process of internalization, whereby individuals accept the influence of others because of utility functions. In contrast, normative social influence operates through the process of identification or compliance. The identification process occurs when individuals accept the influence of others and adopt similar behaviors or attitudes, believing that the self-defining relationship between them and the others will improve. Compliance emerges when an individual conforms to majority norms in exchange for a favorable reaction from others.

Little research in consumer behavior has investigated the proposed processes through which identification or compliance operates. Consumer behavior research regarding the impact of consensus information on product judgments has mainly explored the informational value of consensus (e.g., Maheswaran and Chaiken 1991), rather than its conformity pressure. For example, within the heuristic-systematic model, Maheswaran and Chaiken demonstrated that when individuals are in a state of low motivation, consensus information serves as an important judgment input. When individuals are in a state of high motivation, consensus information only impacts product judgments when its valence is consistent with product attribute information. Mehta et al.'s (2001) investigation of reference group influence also highlighted the importance of informational utility and showed that the informational influence of reference groups is the most persuasive of influences. The present study will also explore the informational social influence of consensus.

Consumer behavior research has shown that the impact of social influence can vary across individuals and products. For example, Park and Lessig (1977) demonstrated that,

when purchasing products, students are subject to informational social influence more than housewives. Other research has shown that the impact of social influence on product purchases or service selections is greater for products or services that are publicly consumed versus privately consumed and for luxuries versus necessities (Bearden and Etzel 1982; Mehta et al. 2001). In line with past research, this study will explore factors that affect the social influence of consensus information in an ad-viewing context.

### Gender and the Effectiveness of Consensus Information

Aaker and Maheswaran (1997) showed that consensus information is a diagnostic cue for brand evaluation in collectivist cultures. They reasoned that individuals in collectivist cultures hold an interdependent and connected view of the self that focuses on relationships with others. On the other hand, people in individualist cultures develop independent views of the self that center more on autonomy. Information about others' opinions or group norms is therefore regarded as more diagnostic for collectivist consumers relative to individualist consumers.

Markus and Oyserman (1989) theorized that women are more likely than men to develop an interdependent and connected self-concept and thereby more likely to see others as an extension of the self, similar to individuals from collectivist cultures. Later research demonstrated that, in comparison to men, women generate higher ratings on the separateness–connectedness scale—a scale measuring individual's self-other connectedness (Wang and Mowen 1997)—and express higher ratings on dependence and self-other associations (Wang et al. 2000).

Most importantly, Markus and Oyserman (1989) argued that structural differences in women's and men's self-construal affect their responsiveness to information. They reasoned that individuals with a connected view of the self are especially sensitive to information pertaining to interpersonal domains, whereas individuals with a separate view of the self are more sensitive to information concerning “separate” aspects of the self. Drawing upon Markus and Oyserman's arguments, Wang et al. (2000) found that women favor brands that are advertised with a “connected” ad appeal, but men prefer brands that are advertised with a “separate” ad appeal.

In line with Aaker and Maheswaran's (1997) finding that consensus information is more diagnostic for collectivists than individualists, this paper predicts that consensus information should be more diagnostic for women than men. Consequently, women should express higher levels of purchase intention towards an advertised product when ads suggest that the majority of consumers favor the product compared to when ads do not include any majority views.

On the other hand, men's responses to these ads should be relatively unaffected by the presence or absence of consensus information.

As argued earlier, consensus information should be more diagnostic for women than for men because differences in their self-construal affect responsiveness to certain information. From this perspective, the impact of consensus information lies in its informational utility. If consensus or majority views mainly exert informational social influence, but not normative social influence, then consensus opinions should be equally diagnostic whether originating from general consumers or peer groups. On the other hand, if consensus information mainly exerts normative social influence, then it is expected that participants will show greater compliance with consensus information when it is expressed by peer groups rather than by general consumers. The effect of these two types of consensus will also be explored in experiment one. The following hypothesis was tested in experiment one.

**Hypothesis 1** A significant interaction between gender and consensus on purchase intention will emerge. Female participants will generate higher levels of purchase intention when exposed to ads with consensus information as opposed to ads without consensus information. However, the purchase intentions of male participants will not be affected by presence of consensus information.

### Experiment One

#### Methods

#### Design

This study was a  $3 \times 2$  between-subjects experimental design. The first factor, availability of consensus cues, was manipulated and had three levels: general consumer consensus, college peer consensus, and no consensus. The second factor was gender. The dependent variable was purchase intentions.

#### Participants

Participants ( $N = 192$ ) between the ages of 19 and 24 were recruited from a college in Taiwan. Equal numbers of male and female participants were recruited. They were paid NT\$100 (equivalent to US\$3) for their participation.

#### Ad Stimuli

Professionals working at an ad agency created the stimuli, which were advertisements for shoes—a product commonly

purchased by college consumers. In order to reduce any possible confounding effects, visuals and layouts were similar for ads with and without consensus cues. Information regarding product attributes was also included in the three versions of the ads.

### Procedures

Participants were randomly given a folder containing the stimuli for one of the three conditions. They were told that the study was designed to examine the effects of various ad layouts on readers' responses. The folder contained two ads: a filler ad for a known brand followed by the target ad for a fictitious brand. The filler ad was held constant across the different conditions. After reading the ads, participants rated their purchase intentions for the target product and the filler product.

### Independent Variable: Availability of Consensus

Ads containing general consumer consensus cues stated that a majority of general consumers liked the product. Ads with college peer consensus cues had two versions. Male participants viewed the version of the ad claiming that a study conducted by a well-known research company suggested that a majority of *male* college consumers liked the product. Female participants viewed a similar version, except it claimed that a majority of *female* college consumers liked the product.

A pretest determined that, in addition to reasonable pricing, "cushioning", "durability", "styles," and "easy to fit with all styles of clothing" were the four most important criteria college students considered when purchasing shoes. Therefore, the ads with consensus cues specifically stated that after trials, 95% of the consumers (male college students/female college students/general consumers) rated the cushioning of the shoes as comfortable, 90% rated the shoes as durable, 92% liked the shoes for their fashion and style, and 98% thought the shoes went well with all styles of clothing. The ads without consensus information simply mentioned that the shoes provide great cushioning, have high durability, have a great style, and go with all styles of clothing.

Participants in experiment one were asked the degree to which they identify themselves with their male or female college peers on a 10-point scale. Analyses showed that males expressed more identification with male college peers than with general others,  $t(95) = 2.02$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $M_{\text{male peer}} = 6.46$ ,  $SD = 2.08$ ,  $M_{\text{general}} = 6.10$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ . Similarly, females identified more with female college peers than with general others,  $t(95) = 1.94$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $M_{\text{female peer}} = 6.33$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ,  $M_{\text{general}} = 6.04$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ . These analyses confirmed that participants

identified with their college peers to a higher degree than with general others.

### Dependent Variable: Purchase Intentions

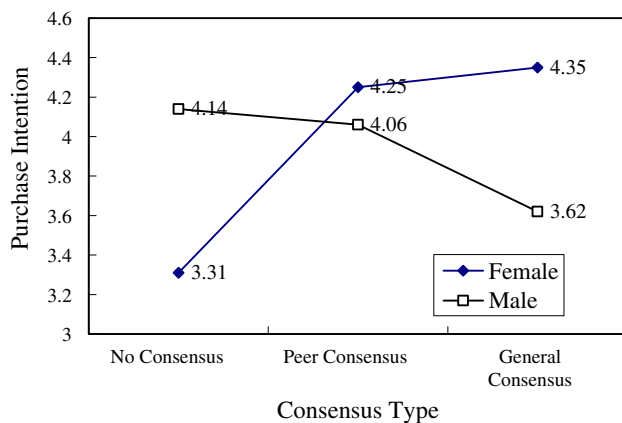
Participants' purchase intentions were measured using a three-item scale adopted from Zhang (1996) on a 7-point Likert-type scale: "I will probably purchase the product," "It is likely for me to purchase the product," and "It is possible for me to purchase the product." Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .93.

### Covariate: Product Involvement

Product involvement was included as a covariate. Participants' product involvement was measured using Laurent and Kapferer's (1985) scale (Cronbach's alpha = .84). Examples of the items include: "When you choose shoes, it is not a big deal if you make a mistake (reversed item)," and "I attach great importance to shoes."

### Results

A 3 (availability of consensus)  $\times$  2 (gender) analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with product involvement as the covariate indicated that the gender by consensus interaction on purchase intention was significant,  $F(2, 185) = 3.09$ ,  $p = .05$ . The main effects of gender,  $F(1, 185) = .01$ ,  $p = .97$ , and consensus,  $F(2, 185) = 1.06$ ,  $p = .35$ , were not significant. As expected, female participants' ratings of purchase intention were not equal across the three levels of consensus,  $F(1, 92) = 3.56$ ,  $p = .03$ . Helmert contrasts further indicated that the mean purchase intention rating of the advertised product without consensus cues was significantly lower than the combined means of intention ratings for the two ads containing consensus cues,  $p = .01$ ,  $M_{\text{no consensus}} = 3.31$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ,  $M_{\text{general}} = 4.25$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ,  $M_{\text{peer}} = 4.35$ ,  $SD = 1.88$ , see Fig. 1. The difference between purchase intention ratings for the general consumer and the college peer consensus ads, however, was not significant,  $p = .90$ . In clear contrast, male participants did not rate purchase intentions significantly differently across the three levels of consensus,  $F(1, 92) = .74$ ,  $p = .48$ . Helmert contrasts indicated that the mean purchase intention rating of the advertised product without consensus cues was not significantly different from the combined means of intention ratings for the two ads with consensus information,  $p = .43$ ,  $M_{\text{no consensus}} = 4.14$ ,  $SD = 1.97$ ,  $M_{\text{general}} = 4.06$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ,  $M_{\text{peer}} = 3.62$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ . The difference between mean intention ratings for the general public consensus ad and the college peer consensus ad was also not significant,  $p = .36$ . Therefore, hypothesis 1 was fully supported.



**Fig. 1** The interaction between gender and availability of consensus cues

## Discussion

The findings of experiment one indicate that female participants favor ad messages featuring consensus information in addition to product attribute information over ad messages only containing product attributes. It seems that consensus information is more diagnostic for women's decision making than it is for men's. It is important to note that the main effect of consensus cues was not significant. If gender differences had not been examined in this experiment, the wrong conclusion might have been made—namely, that consensus information does not exert influences on consumers' purchase decisions. In general, findings from experiment one underscore the importance of considering individual differences when investigating the effectiveness of consensus information.

Past research has not specifically explored the relative effectiveness of consensus information when the majority viewpoint is derived from general consumers as opposed to peers, a group with which consumers identify themselves to a higher degree. In the present experiment, these two sources of consensus information did not differentially influence either female or male participants. These findings provide better support for the idea that consensus information influences women via its informational utility rather than through some sort of identification or compliance mechanism. If consensus information triggers an identification or compliance process, then peer college students' viewpoints should have affected purchase intention ratings more than the viewpoints of general consumers.

## Consensus Information in Different Purchase Decision Contexts

In most situations, individuals make decisions to purchase products either they or their immediate family members will

consume. However, in some cases purchase decisions are made on behalf of others, for example, choosing a birthday present or selecting the restaurant for a group dinner. Such decisions should be distinguished from decisions made for oneself. Therefore, this study delineates two types of purchase decisions: personal and group, and suggests that the information value of consensus, and thus its influence, varies across these two purchase decision contexts.

A purchase decision made on behalf of others can involve high levels of social risk. If the decision is poorly made, one fears disappointing others and facing social disapproval. Past research has demonstrated that as the perceived risk of a purchase increases, consumers are more likely to seek others' opinions (Dowling and Staelin 1994; Locander and Hermann 1979) and prefer options that are standard and familiar, rather than novel and incongruent (Campbell and Goodstein 2001). In addition, when ego risks are involved, product information from others is deemed important (Roselius 1971). Finally, research has shown that when individuals' product evaluations are publicly visible, they are more subject to other people's opinions (Cohen and Golden 1972). Based on these findings, this study argues that consensus information should have a more positive impact on purchase intentions for purchases made on behalf of others compared to those made for oneself. However, this effect of purchase decision context should vary across individuals with different levels of susceptibility to interpersonal influence.

## Individuals' Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence

Susceptibility to interpersonal influence (SII) is believed to be a general personality trait (McGuire 1968) and has been shown to influence consumer behaviors (Clark and Goldsmith 2006; Silvera et al. 2008). In the context of consumer behavior, Bearden et al. (1989) defined an individual's SII as "the need to identify with or enhance one's image in the opinion of significant others through the acquisition and use of products and brands, the willingness to conform to the expectations of others regarding purchase decisions, and/or the tendency to learn about products and services by observing others or seeking information from others" (p. 473). This definition reflects susceptibility to the two domains of social influence previously discussed: informational and normative. This paper thus predicts that consensus cues should be more informative for individuals who are high in SII compared to those who are low.

## Individuals' Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence in Different Contexts

Aspects of the situational context might further exacerbate the influence of consensus information for different individuals.



Netemeyer et al. (1992, study one) found that individuals who believe others will judge them based on their purchases and who care what others think of their purchases, are more susceptible to interpersonal influences. Furthermore, Netemeyer et al. (study two) showed that when situations lead consumers to believe that “important” individuals will make unfavorable attributions about their purchase behavior, consumers more attentive to social comparison information express significantly higher levels of compliance than less attentive consumers. This indicates that contexts involving social risk increase individuals’ motivation to consider others’ opinions differentially, depending on individual traits. In study two, Netemeyer et al. explored participants’ attention to social comparison information, a construct found to positively correlate with SII in their first study. They did not, however, directly test whether individual differences in SII might similarly interact with situational context.

The present study reasons that individuals high in SII who are eager to make good impressions should perceive consensus information as more diagnostic than those low in SII when a purchase involves social risk. Specifically, when making a purchase decision on behalf of others (vs. oneself), only participants high in SII will report greater purchase intentions for products advertised with consensus information. In contrast, the interaction will not emerge for products advertised without consensus information.

**Hypothesis 2** A significant three-way interaction between consensus cues, purchase decision context, and SII on purchase intention will emerge. Specifically, a significant interaction between purchase decision context and SII will emerge for ads with consensus cues but not for ads without consensus cues.

## Experiment Two

### Methods

#### *Participants and Design*

Sixty-four undergraduate students between the ages of 19 and 24 were recruited from a university in Taiwan for this study. Equal numbers of male and female participants were recruited. They were paid NT\$100 (equivalent to US\$3) for their participation.

This study was a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  between-subjects experimental design. The two manipulated factors were availability of consensus cues (with consensus vs. without consensus) and purchase decision context (personal purchase vs. group purchase). Participants were also categorized as high or low in SII based on a median split of their ratings on Bearden et al.’s (1989) SII scale.

### *Procedures*

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions. The first part of the experiment was similar to experiment one. The only difference was that participants read a scenario before reading the ads. After participants finished this part, they were told that the experimenter was conducting another research study regarding college students’ values and lifestyles. They were asked to help with this research by answering a list of questions that contained items from the SII scale as well as other personality and values filler items.

### *Independent Variables*

**Availability of Consensus Cues** The general consumer consensus ad and the no-consensus ad from experiment one were used here.

**Purchase Decision Context** The personal purchase scenario read: “This morning, when you were all dressed and ready to go to class, it occurred to you that you didn’t have the right shoes to go with your outfit. You decided to purchase one more pair of shoes after class. There are a wide variety of brands out there, including a couple of newly introduced brands. You start to think about what brand to purchase.” The group purchase scenario read: “You and your friends are going to have a birthday party for one of your best friends. You were talking about what presents to purchase for your friend. Then you all agreed that he or she might need a pair of new shoes. Your friends suggested that you be in charge of selecting the shoes for your friend. There are a wide variety of brands out there, including a couple of newly introduced brands. You start to think about how to select a brand that will please your friend as well as other friends who expect you to make a good purchase decision for them.” After each scenario, the instructions asked the participants to read the following two shoe ads as if they were the person described in the story.

Two questions were asked to check whether the purchase decision context manipulation was successful. Analyses indicated that ratings of participants in the personal purchase and the group purchase conditions were significantly different for both questions: “I read the ad as if I am purchasing a product for my friend on behalf of all the others,”  $F(1, 62) = 8.64, p = .01, M_{\text{personal purchase}} = 2.66, M_{\text{group purchase}} = 4.00$ , and, “I am responsible for making a right selection,”  $F(1, 62) = 16.52, p = .01, M_{\text{personal purchase}} = 3.97, M_{\text{group purchase}} = 5.03$ . Therefore, the manipulation was deemed satisfactory.

**Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence** Bearden et al.’s (1989) scale was used to measure participants’ SII.

Reliability of the scale was acceptable, with a Cronbach's alpha of .86. Participants were categorized into two groups based on a median split. The two groups differed significantly on SII,  $F(1, 62) = 90.34$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $M_{\text{low}} = 3.77$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ,  $M_{\text{high}} = 5.03$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ .

#### Dependent Variable: Purchase Intentions

The scale used was the same as in experiment one (Cronbach's alpha = .95).

#### Results

Product involvement (Cronbach's alpha = .84, the same scale as in experiment one) again was analyzed as a covariate. A 2 (availability of consensus cues)  $\times$  2 (purchase decision context)  $\times$  2 (SII) ANCOVA indicated that, as expected, the three-way interaction on purchase intention was significant,  $F(1, 55) = 7.23$ ,  $p = .01$ , see Table 1. When reading an ad with consensus information, an interaction between purchase decision context and SII was significant,  $F(1, 31) = 4.76$ ,  $p = .04$ . As predicted, participants high in SII generated higher purchase intentions than those low in SII,  $M_{\text{highSII}} = 4.40$ ,  $SD = 1.80$ ,  $M_{\text{lowSII}} = 2.72$ ,  $SD = 2.07$ , when making a group decision. In clear contrast, participants high in SII generated lower purchase intentions than those low in SII,  $M_{\text{highSII}} = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ,  $M_{\text{lowSII}} = 4.95$ ,  $SD = .97$ , when making a personal decision.

On the other hand, when reading an ad without consensus information, the interaction between purchase decision context and SII was not significant,  $F(1, 31) = 2.42$ ,  $p = .13$  (for group decision condition:  $M_{\text{highSII}} = 2.58$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ,  $M_{\text{lowSII}} = 3.03$ ,  $SD = 1.87$ ; for personal decision condition:  $M_{\text{highSII}} = 4.90$ ,  $SD = 1.72$ ,  $M_{\text{lowSII}} = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ). Therefore, hypothesis 2 was fully supported.

**Table 1** ANCOVA results for experiment two and three

Experiment two			Experiment three		
Covariate	Purchase intention		Covariate	Purchase intention	
	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Involvement	3.93	.05	Involvement	0.92	.34
Consensus (C)	1.27	.26	Consensus (C)	0.04	.85
Decision (D)	9.32	.01	Decision (D)	0.08	.78
SII (S)	0.01	.93	NFC (N)	0.87	.35
C $\times$ D	1.33	.25	C $\times$ D	0.53	.47
C $\times$ S	0.34	.57	C $\times$ N	0.12	.73
D $\times$ S	0.25	.62	D $\times$ N	0.12	.73
C $\times$ D $\times$ S	7.23	.01	C $\times$ D $\times$ N	4.68	.03

#### Discussion

Findings show that, consistent with expectations, when advertising contained no consensus information, participants' SII did not moderate the effect of purchase decision context on purchase intentions. In clear contrast, when advertising contained consensus information, this moderating relationship emerged. Specifically, those high in SII expressed an enhanced intention to purchase the product compared to those low in SII when making the group decision, but not when making the personal decision.

In addition to the personality traits previously discussed and examined in experiment two, persuasion literature has shown that individual differences in NFC also affect the process by which majority opinions influence attitudes toward an issue (Areni et al. 2000). Therefore, experiment three further explores whether or not an individual's NFC moderates the effect of consensus information on consumers' intentions to purchase an advertised product.

#### Need for Cognitive Closure

Individuals differ in terms of their motivation to process information and reach conclusions (Kruglanski 1989, 1990a, b). Some people have a strong motivation for closure, preferring definite answers to their questions, yet others resist closure, preferring ambiguity over definitiveness. This motivation for "a firm answer to a question and an aversion toward ambiguity" is generally referred to as "need for cognitive closure" (Kruglanski and Webster 1996, p. 264). According to Kruglanski and Webster, NFC varies along a continuum with a strong desire for closure at one end and an avoidance of closure at the other.

NFC has also been associated with reliance on schemata and heuristic cues (Cronley et al. 2005; Kruglanski and Freund 1983; Kruglanski and Mayseless 1987; Lalwani 2009). For example, Kruglanski and Freund (1983) demonstrated that individuals in a state of high NFC, as opposed to low, are more likely to base their judgments on their existing knowledge structures. As a result, stereotypical cognition exerts significant impact on their judgments. Klein and Webster (2000) showed that high NFC individuals are more likely to respond to persuasive messages on the basis of heuristic cues and less likely to systematically scrutinize persuasive messages. Kruglanski and Mayseless (1987) also demonstrated that individuals high in NFC prefer the concurring opinions of others more than those low in NFC.

NFC has been shown to be enhanced by situational contexts. Motivation for cognitive closure depends on an individual's analysis of the perceived costs and benefits of an epistemic state (Kruglanski 1990b; Webster and Kruglanski 1994). An individual who perceives greater

benefits of possessing closure will be more motivated to do so. Under conditions where reaching closure is encouraged, individuals are less likely to ponder over competing interpretations of information (Mayseless and Kruglanski 1987) and are more likely to develop judgments based on information presented early (Kruglanski and Freund 1983).

NFC is regarded as an inherent individual trait (Webster and Kruglanski 1994), yet its influence can also be moderated by processing contexts (Kruglanski and Freund 1983). Individuals high in NFC are more likely to rely on heuristic cues than those low in NFC, and situational contexts can further motivate those high in NFC to reach for closure and thus rely more on heuristic cues. Therefore, simple cognitive heuristics, such as “consensus implies correctness,” may serve as ready cues that affect judgments when individuals have high NFC and when a group purchase decision is involved. Specifically, this paper proposes that the effectiveness of ads featuring consensus cues should be enhanced when a group (vs. personal) purchase decision is involved, but only for individuals with high NFC. In contrast, the effectiveness of ads without consensus cues should not vary as a function of NFC and purchase decision contexts.

Past studies have indicated that the impact of social influence varies as a function of different product characteristics (e.g., Bearden and Etzel 1982; Childers and Rao 1992). These studies generally have shown that social influence is greater for public versus private products. Moreover, individuals are more subject to social influence with respect to luxury goods than necessities (see also Mehta et al. 2001). The ads in experiments one and two featured a publicly consumed product (shoes). However, this study reasons that if consensus influences decisions due to its information utility, its influence will also emerge for a privately consumed product. Therefore, experiment three utilizes a product that is usually considered a privately consumed necessity.

**Hypothesis 3** A significant three-way interaction between consensus cues, purchase decision context, and NFC on purchase intentions will emerge. Specifically, a significant interaction between purchase decision context and NFC will emerge for ads with consensus cues but not for ads without consensus cues.

## Experiment Three

### Methods

#### *Participants and Design*

Undergraduate students ( $N = 128$ ) between the ages of 19 and 23 were recruited from a university in Taiwan for this

study. Equal numbers of male and female participants were recruited. They were paid NT\$100 for their participation.

This study was a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  between-subjects experimental design. The two manipulated factors were availability of consensus cues (with consensus vs. without consensus) and purchase decision context (personal vs. group). Participants were also categorized as high or low in NFC based on a median split of their ratings on Webster and Kruglanski's (1994) NFC scale.

#### *Ad Stimuli and Procedure*

The products used in this study were tea drinks, which were consumed regularly by college students in Taiwan where the experiment was conducted. The visuals and layouts were held constant for consensus ads and non-consensus ads. The same procedures as in experiment two were adopted.

#### *Independent Variables*

**Availability of Consensus Cues** The ads with consensus information mentioned that, according to research conducted by a known research company, a majority of consumers like the product. A pretest determined that tea quality, aroma, packaging, and price were the four most important criteria consumers considered when purchasing tea drinks. Therefore, the ad with consensus information specifically stated that 95% of consumers rated the tea as being of high quality, 93% preferred its aroma, 88% liked the packaging, and 92% thought the price was acceptable. The ads without consensus information simply mentioned that the tea was of premium quality, the aroma was appealing, the package was well designed, and the price was acceptable.

**Purchase Decision Context** The personal purchase scenario read: “It is almost summer and you always get thirsty after a lecture. Most drinks are too sweet and may not be as refreshing as a green tea drink. Drinking green tea quenches your thirst. There is, however, a wide variety of brands out there, including a couple of newly introduced brands. You are thinking about what brand to choose.” The group purchase scenario read: “You and your friends are preparing a birthday party for your friend this evening. It is almost summer. Drinks are definitely important for parties. Your friends put you in charge of buying the drinks for the party. They agree that most drinks are too sweet and may not be as refreshing as a green tea drink. There is, however, a wide variety of brands out there, including a couple of newly introduced brands. You are thinking about what brand to purchase.” The instructions then asked the



participants to read the following two ads as if they were the person described in the story.

Three questions were asked to check whether the purchase decision context manipulation was successful. Two of the questions were adopted from experiment two. Ratings between participants assigned to the personal and the group purchase condition were significantly different on the three questions: “I read the ad as if I am purchasing tea drinks for my friends’ birthday party,”  $F(1, 126) = 45.51, p = .01, M_{\text{personal purchase}} = 2.61, SD = 1.20, M_{\text{group purchase}} = 4.31, SD = 1.62$ ; “I am responsible for making a right selection,”  $F(1, 126) = 9.21, p = .01, M_{\text{personal purchase}} = 3.09, SD = 1.48, M_{\text{group purchase}} = 3.97, SD = 1.77$ ; and, “Others care about what brand I purchase,”  $F(1, 126) = 11.93, p = .01, M_{\text{personal purchase}} = 2.75, SD = 1.69, M_{\text{group purchase}} = 3.80, SD = 1.74$ . Therefore, the manipulation was considered satisfactory.

**Need for Closure** Ten items were selected from Webster and Kruglanski’s (1994) NFC scale. The ten items were: “I enjoy having a clear and structured mode of life”; “I like to have a place for everything and everything in its place”; “I enjoy the uncertainty of going into a new situation without knowing what might happen” (reverse scored); “I dislike unpredictable situations”; “I tend to struggle with most decisions” (reverse scored); “I would describe myself as indecisive” (reverse scored); “I dislike it when a person’s statement could mean many different things”; “I feel uncomfortable when someone’s meaning or intention is unclear to me”; “When thinking about a problem, I consider as many different opinions on the issue as possible”; and, “When considering most conflict situations, I can usually see how both sides could be right.” Cronbach’s alpha was .74 indicating the scale had acceptable reliability. Based on the median split, participants were categorized into two groups, which differed significantly on NFC scores,  $F(1, 126) = 178.28, p = .01, M_{\text{low}} = 3.92, SD = 0.34, M_{\text{high}} = 4.80, SD = 0.40$ .

#### *Dependent Variable: Purchase Intentions*

Participants rated how likely they were to purchase the product in the future on the same purchase intention scale used in experiments one and two (Cronbach’s alpha = .95).

#### **Results**

Product involvement (Cronbach’s alpha = .80, the same scale as in experiment one) was analyzed as a covariate. A  $2$  (availability of consensus cues)  $\times 2$  (purchase decision context)  $\times 2$  (NFC) ANCOVA indicated that the three-way interaction on purchase intention was significant,  $F(1, 119) = 4.68, p = .03$ , see Table 1. For ads with

consensus information, the interaction between NFC and purchase decision context was not significant,  $F(1, 59) = 1.63, p = .22$ . The means, however, were consistent with expectations. When a group decision was involved, participants high in NFC generated relatively higher purchase intentions than those low in NFC,  $M_{\text{high}} = 5.69, SD = 1.60, M_{\text{low}} = 4.63, SD = 2.11$ . In clear contrast, for personal decisions, purchase intentions were similar for both high and low NFC participants,  $M_{\text{high}} = 4.94, SD = 1.66, M_{\text{low}} = 5.05, SD = 1.54$ .

For ads without consensus information, the interaction between decision context and need for closure was also not significant,  $F(1, 59) = 3.34, p = .10$ , however, an examination of means revealed a reverse pattern. Participants high in NFC had lower purchase intentions than those low in NFC for group purchase decisions,  $M_{\text{high NFC}} = 4.56, SD = 2.13, M_{\text{low NFC}} = 5.17, SD = 1.80$ , but had higher purchase intentions for personal purchase decisions,  $M_{\text{high NFC}} = 5.67, SD = .96, M_{\text{low NFC}} = 4.61, SD = 1.75$ . The three-way interaction and pattern of means weakly support hypothesis 3.

#### **Discussion**

The findings of this experiment are generally consistent with expectations. When advertising featured consensus information, participants high in NFC expressed an enhanced intention to purchase compared to those low in NFC for group purchase decisions, whereas for personal decisions NFC did not seem to have an effect on purchase intentions. In other words, the combination of individual differences and situational context contributed to the enhanced effectiveness of consensus information in advertisements.

#### **General Discussion**

Reporting favorable poll standings for a candidate is a common political persuasion tactic (Morwitz and Pluzinski 1996), often leading to what is called “the bandwagon effect” (Marsh 1984). Similarly, in the world of consumer goods, consumers often rely on consensus information when formulating product decisions (Aaker and Maheswaran 1997; Chang 2007; Maheswaran and Chaiken 1991). Consensus information also plays an important role when consumers evaluate electronic word-of-mouth or browse others’ product opinions online (Benedicktus et al. 2010; Khare et al. 2011). This paper proposes that the impact of consensus information on purchase intention is contingent upon situational context and individual differences. Results of three experiments showed no main effects of consensus information. Rather, the consensus information interacted with individual differences and situation variables, thereby

affecting consumers' purchase intentions towards advertised products.

Consistent with past research, these three experiments showed that consensus information has an important informational utility function for consumers. Experiment one compared the effectiveness of presenting the majority view of college peers, as opposed to general consumers. If consensus information exerts normative social influences, then the college peer group consensus should be more effective than the general consumer consensus. On the contrary, if consensus information generates informational influence, then both the peer group and the general consumer consensus are informative and should generate similar effects. Findings revealed that, even though participants identified more with college peers than with general others, their purchase intentions were unaffected by the source of the consensus information. These results seem to support the view that consensus information is influential because of its informational value. This conclusion is also consistent with Mehta et al.'s (2001) findings that informational social influence is more pervasive than other forms of social influence. However, college peers represent a large group of individuals unknown to the participants. Although advertisers are unlikely to personalize ad messages to present the views of known others for a specific consumer, it is very common for consumers to consult with friends or relatives when searching for product information. What concerns consumer researchers is whether both informational and normative social influence are at work when consensus information originates from family members or intimate others. Future experiments could test this question by including these other sources of consensus information.

Even though this paper argues that the impact of consensus information in ads lies in its informational utility, in the three experiments participants were never asked how diagnostic they perceived the ads to be. This question was not asked because direct probing of diagnostic perceptions could call attention to certain ad content, thus biasing participant responses. Instead, the effectiveness of advertisements was measured by purchase intentions. The underlying assumption is that, if consensus ads do influence participants' judgments, the influence should be manifested in their purchase intentions. In addition, instructions asked participants to read the ad as if they were about to purchase the product. Therefore, it seems reasonable to directly probe participants' purchase intentions. Future studies could explore cognitive responses to advertising to illuminate understanding of the process via which consensus information exerts its influence.

Gender differences in susceptibility to interpersonal influence have been well discussed in past literature (e.g., Eagly 1969, 1978). One popular view is that women are

socialized to yield to normative pressure (e.g., Burgoon et al. 1983). This study adopts an alternative view, arguing that socialization affects men and women's self-construal, which, in turn, leads them to respond divergently to the same ad message (Markus and Oyserman 1989). Within this view, this paper reasons that women regard consensus information as more diagnostic, and, therefore, respond more favorably to ads featuring that information.

Experiments two and three explored two individual traits. Recently, individual differences in SII were used to explain how consumers respond to products with different countries-of-origin (Marcous et al. 1997) and the different roles consumers play in family purchase decisions (Lalwani 2002). This study extends past research by demonstrating the relationship between SII and consumer responses to ads with consensus information. The influence of other personality traits that are similar to SII, such as attention to social comparison information, could be the subject of future research.

Recent research has shown NFC to be an important variable to consider when exploring consumer behaviors, such as responses to product information involving competing brands (Kardes et al. 2002; Zhang et al. 2002) and degree of product information search (Houghton and Grewal 2000). Extending past literature, this study showed that an individual's NFC also can moderate the effectiveness of consensus information. Future research could investigate whether NFC moderates the effectiveness of other advertising appeals, such as image versus issue appeals or humorous appeals that involve relief from expectation versus incongruity resolution (Speck 1991).

In addition to individual differences, situational context also appears to be an important moderator of consensus information's effectiveness. Even though some individuals may be disposed to rely on consensus information to formulate judgments, they will not do so unless motivated by situational contexts. This study argues that certain situational contexts, such as making a purchase decision on behalf of others, enhance the perceived risk of a decision. In addition, it is likely that accountability, "the need to justify one's views to others" (Tetlock 1983, p. 74), can be enhanced by a group purchase decision. Given there are multiple explanations for the same findings, future research could specifically investigate the mechanism underlying the effects of group purchase decisions.

The findings of these three experiments should be considered in light of their limitations. For example, all participants were recruited from a college campus. Park and Lessig (1977) showed that college students are more susceptible to reference group influence than housewives. Therefore, generalizing findings of the three experiments to the public should be done with caution. Secondly, this study measured participants' responses to a new product brand, rather than an existing brand. Kruglanski et al.

(1993) suggested that individuals high in NFC who have obtained closure on a subject may be more resistant to newly elaborated information. Therefore, new persuasive information on the subject may not affect attitudes. However, individuals high in NFC who have no initial viewpoint on a subject would eagerly accept persuasive information to help obtain closure. Vermeir et al. (2002) also discussed the impact of NFC in different stages of evaluation formulation. In early stages, individuals with high NFC are more likely to respond to information, but once they reach closure, they will resist further information processing. In line with these findings, for high NFC participants consensus information will probably have a greater effect when an ad features a new product as opposed to an existing product. A third limitation of this study is that the two products used in the experiments have dominating experiential attributes, attributes that cannot be evaluated unless consumers have tried the product (Nelson 1974), rather than search attributes, attributes that can be verified by second-hand sources such as advertising. West and Broniarczyk (1998) argued that others' opinions are more likely to be important for products with experiential attributes. Therefore, future research could focus on the effectiveness of consensus information on judgments about products with search attributes as well.

Regardless of these limitations, this study makes a contribution by exploring one common persuasion tactic and specifying the possible contingencies under which its effect might vary. Such findings could have valuable implications for marketers. For example, consensus information seems to serve an important informational utility for female consumers. Therefore, advertising that promotes experiential products for female consumers (such as cosmetics or lotions) could provide specific ratings of other consumers' attitudes about the products. Finally, the findings from this study suggest that advertisers could include consensus information when promoting publicly consumed products to help reduce consumers' purchase uncertainty and facilitate their decision making, especially when the purchase decision is visible to others.

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